

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

11 August 2007

## **E.Land store dispute in South Korea enters second month**

Police have attacked workers and jailed union leaders in a government campaign to end a dispute at the E.Land Group, a Korean retail chain. As the conflict enters its second month, seven union officials are being held in a Seoul jail and face heavy fines.

E.Land operates 32 former Carrefour supermarkets under the Homever name and owns several New Core Outlet department stores as well as Kim's Club food discount outlets. In June, the company sacked 1,000 casual workers just prior to the implementation of new laws on July 1 requiring employers to make permanent all part-timers with two years service. The company has begun replacing the sacked staff with workers from labour-hire companies.

On July 31, 4,600 riot police stormed E.Land's Kangnam New Core department store in central Seoul and dragged away 260 sacked workers who were sitting-in. On August 5, more than 1,500 E.Land workers participated in nationwide picketing at 10 of the company's stores. Company thugs attacked picketers, seriously injuring two, at the Homever store in Mokdong.

Despite massive public support for the sacked workers, the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) have failed to launch any meaningful industrial campaign against the company or the government. The KCTU executive will not meet until August 21 to discuss the dispute and the FKTU leadership has said it will support a consumer boycott. Meanwhile, the Korean courts warned the E.Land union and individual workers face massive fines if they hold more sit-ins.

## **Korean healthcare workers end strike**

Thousands of striking healthcare employees at four Seoul hospitals affiliated with the Yonsei University Health System (YUHS) ended a month-long strike on August 7, following an agreement brokered by the National Labor Relations Commission.

The workers went out on July 10 demanding a 4 percent pay rise, seniority allowances and regular work status for part-time employees. Yonsei management offered only 2 percent and refused to negotiate on the other issues. The union accepted a compromise based on a 3 percent annual salary increase, 300,000 won (\$US325) special compensation payment for unionised workers and an improved welfare package. Management also promised to establish a fund, equivalent to 1.7 percent of the total wage, to improve working conditions for temporary employees.

## **Thailand garment workers sacked for striking**

Over 100 Burmese migrant workers at BB Top garment factory in Mae Sot in Thailand's Tak Province were sacked on August 4 for striking over low wages. The workers are paid between 55 and 90 baht (\$US1.7 to \$US2.88) a day. They are asking for 143 baht, the official

award rate.

BB Top has a history of not paying the correct wage to migrant workers. In 2004, the courts ordered the company to pay 14 employees outstanding wages. During 2006, BB Top fired over 100 migrant workers over wages issues and their cases are currently before the court.

## **Indian port workers threaten national strike**

Indian dock and port workers are threatening a nationwide indefinite strike from September 1 over several demands. They want higher wages, the filling of vacancies, promotions, the restoration of the retirement age to 60 years and a halt to privatisation and outsourcing. The workers have also demanded 50 percent of the Dearness Allowance merged with the base wage and a monthly interim relief payment of 1,000 rupees (\$US25) for workers and pensioners effective from January 1 this year.

Workers claim that they have raised these demands over a protracted period but the government has failed to act. The All India Port and Dockers Workers' Federation is expected to issue a strike notice to port management by August 16.

## **Bangladeshi jute mill workers strike for pay**

Over 200 workers at Platinum Jubilee Jute Mills (PJJM) at Khalishpur in Khulna, Bangladesh went on strike on August 4 demanding a wage increase. They have threatened to continue the strike until the demand is met.

At the same time, the Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) is working on a factory closure program and is drawing up a final list of seven state-owned jute mills where workers will be pushed into voluntary retirement.

## **Sri Lanka market porters demand pick-up rate increase**

Porters (*natamis*) at the Pettah wholesale market in Colombo picketed on August 6 to demand a one rupee increment for each sack of goods lifted.

The workers told the press that despite cost of living increases they do not even take home 200 rupees (\$US 1.75) a day, after working from early morning till late evening. The cost of a porter's basic meal of 200 grams bread with bowl of dhal has increased by around 50 percent to 50 rupees.

## **Sri Lankan doctors demand action on transfers**

Anuradhapura Base Hospital doctors in the country's North Central Province went on strike for 24 hours on August 7. They are demanding hospital management release seven doctors whose transfers were approved by the Health Ministry.

In a separate dispute, health workers at the hospital in Kurunegala went on strike on August 7 to demand payment of salary arrears. They are threatening to strike indefinitely if their claim is not met.

## **Management demands that union identify picketers**

A strike which began on June 18 by 15 workers at the stationary company Esselte's warehouse in the Sydney suburb Minto is continuing. The National Union of Workers (NUW) members are opposing attempts by the company to push them onto individual work agreements which eliminate conditions and leave them \$50 a week worse off.

Management is now refusing any negotiations unless the union provides the names of unionists the company alleges were involved in violent picket line incidents outside the warehouse three weeks ago. The company has been filming pickets and had placed what was believed to be a listening device on the outside fence.

Rather than opposing the company's witch hunt, NUW officials continue to claim the trouble was caused by outside agitators and "fringe socialists". Unions NSW secretary John Robertson claimed those involved were not part of the "mainstream union movement" and condemned them for "extremism". The unions have now requested to view the footage filmed by management.

#### **Ferry workers oppose staff shortages**

The New South Wales Industrial Relations Commission this week ordered Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members at Sydney Ferries to lift overtime bans after some ferry services were disrupted or cancelled on August 6.

The workers placed the bans in a dispute over staff shortages. While management claims that staffing is adequate a union spokesman said there were 20 vacant positions that needed to be filled urgently.

Employees claim that they are required to work up to 70 hours a week to maintain services. They have threatened further industrial action if the staffing issue is not addressed.

#### **Sandvik workers strike for second time**

One hundred workers at Sandvik, a mining and construction company owned by Tomago, near Newcastle in New South Wales, walked out for 24 hours on August 6.

The strike is the second 24-hour stoppage in a dispute for a pay increase. The workers placed overtime bans and were threatening a week-long strike if the company did not improve its offer.

The company has since improved its pay offer and Australian Manufacturing Workers Union dropped further industrial action.

#### **New Zealand hotel workers locked out**

Workers at the Gateway Airport Hotel in Mangere, Auckland were locked out on August 3 after beginning strike action two days earlier. Police were called when officials from the Unite union entered the premises on Saturday night after discovering the hotel was illegally using replacement labour during the lockout. Members of Unite struck because the employer had stalled collective agreement negotiations for nearly a year.

A Unite spokesperson said the hotel was a "viciously anti-union employer" and its wages and conditions were well below industry standards. The Labour Department is currently investigating complaints that the cleaning staff were paid less than the minimum wage. The hotel made headlines last year when management refused a pregnant employee ongoing employment. Her case is currently before the courts.

#### **NZ doctors vote for national strike**

Last week, about 200 doctors, members of the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS), in Christchurch backed calls for a national strike. It was the largest in a series of doctors' meetings held to discuss faltering pay talks.

The doctors voted by a 90 percent margin for a postal ballot on strike action which could begin next month, pending the outcome of

mediation. They are fighting for better pay and improvements in recruitment and retention.

New Zealand's senior doctors have been working without a contract for 14 months and doctors at 17 of 21 district health boards have so far voted to reject the latest settlement offer. The boards have offered a 20 percent pay hike over four years, claiming the increase would raise average salaries from \$190,000 to \$235,000. The association maintains that average salaries are actually \$140,000 and accused the district health boards of "creative accounting".

#### **Fijian nurses arrested**

Twenty striking nurses in Fiji were taken in for questioning by police on August 7 when protesting outside a government building where a cabinet meeting was in progress. The Fiji Nursing Association members were on strike against a 5 percent pay cut and a lowering of the retirement age. They had been out for 14 days.

Those seized were taken to the Police Academy and questioned before being released. The police commissioner warned that although the nurses were not charged, statements were taken and a file would be kept open.

Even as the military-appointed interim government stepped up its repression of nurses, the Public Employees Union and Viti National Union of Taukei Workers called off a six-day strike over the same issues, ordering their members to resume normal duties on August 8.

The unions used a statement by coup leader Commodore Frank Bainimarama that the dispute would not be sent to arbitration as an excuse to scuttle the strike. Both unions have accepted a government proposal to restore one fifth of the pay cut with the remainder to be paid in the 2008 budget. The teachers suspended their strike action, after the government brought forward the school holidays by a week, and the nurses union directed its members to return to work on Friday.

#### **Solomon Islands teachers end strike**

Solomon Islands teachers agreed to return to work last week after striking over a pay claim. The Solomon Islands National Teachers Association said the teachers agreed to end their industrial action after accepting a government assurance that it would meet their demands. The workers have threatened further action if the government delays on delivering on its promise.

#### **New Caledonia health workers strike**

Up to 40 striking health workers at the New Caledonia health service picketed the Nouville Geriatric and Psychiatric Centre for two days last week. The Kanak and Exploited Workers Union members are on strike to secure payment of training expenses for a nurse who attended an education course in France two years ago. Health service authorities have refused to reimburse the expenses and proposed that the nurse seek "exterior" financing. A scheduled mediation meeting between the two parties on August 6 did not occur.



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